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## Michael Lapsley survived a South African bomb attack--and gained a new ministry

by James Solheim

(ENS) Michael Lapsley is lucky to be alive. In April 1990 the South African government sent him a bomb in a package containing religious magazines, "an ultimate act of cynicism that they should chose two religious magazines in an attempt to kill a priest," he said during a stop in New York during a speaking tour. He lost both his hands and one eye and suffered serious burns--but he gained a whole new ministry to those who had been brutalized by the violence of the system.

The New Zealand Anglican went to South Africa shortly after his ordination in 1973, at first to study but then to serve as a chaplain on several campuses. "Of course I had read about South Africa and apartheid but I was still very naïve," Lapsley said. As a youth he had read Trevor Huddleston's "Naught for your Comfort," a book "that blew the whistle on apartheid for the international community, so I knew from a very young age that racism and apartheid were evil. But I never really was conscious that it would perhaps be my life's work."

When he arrived in South Africa, he learned very quickly that "there were only two groups--the oppressed and the oppressor. And my color defined which group I belonged to because suddenly my color defined every single aspect of my life and there was no escape from that."

### **An armed struggle**

When he received the letter bomb, Lapsley was living in Zimbabwe, chased out of South Africa in 1976





Michael Lapsley: The Story of a Life

in Zimbabwe, chased out of South Africa in 1970 after he abandoned his pacifism to become chaplain to the outlawed and exiled African National Congress.

Discussing the role of violence in the liberation struggle is not easy for Lapsley. He said that the turning point for him was the murder of school children in Soweto in 1976, an event that "caused my faith to fall apart because what I had to contend with was the reality that those who read the Bible every day, went to church every Sunday, shot children; that somehow racism was so into their souls that they didn't see children, they saw something that was black. And that reality brought me to the painful conclusion that, in our context, people had a right to defend themselves, that the arms struggle was morally legitimate, necessary and justified."

At first he went to live in Lesotho, a for blacks that is surrounded by South Africa. "We used to say that we lived in the belly of the monster there," he said. Officials warned that he was on a South African government "hit list," so he was guarded around the clock. That did not prevent the assassination attempt.

"As a chaplain to a liberation movement, I realized that the only way the people of South Africa were going to be free was by sacrifice, by self-sacrifice," he said during an interview with WABC in New York. He helped educate youth who were also living in exile and became "a soldier of the ANC," using his tongue as his weapon. "And the irony is that the regime took away my hands and left my weapon intact," he said, waving his prosthetic hands for emphasis.

### A new journey

After months of recovery in Australia, Lapsley returned to Africa in 1992 and began "a journey that has included suffering, crucifixion, a kind of death and resurrection."

With the collapse of apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first black president, Lapsley began a new ministry working with victims and helping the tortured heal their memories. His own wounds, he said, have helped because they are "a sign in a tiny way that good is stronger than evil." On his journey he has been able to move "from being a victim to being a survivor to being a victor."





On his return, he saw how deeply damaged people were from years of living under oppression and violence. So he became chaplain at a trauma center, quickly learning that people "carried all kinds of poisons." If they ever hoped to create a new and better society, South Africans had to deal with what they had done to each other. He designed workshops on "healing the memories," a requirement for any deeper kind of forgiveness and reconciliation. For him the question became, "How do we take from the past that which is life-giving?"

His experience has led him to work where he seeks to walk beside others who haven't had their hurt and pain acknowledged and recognized. He is convinced that until that happens, building a new society in South Africa will be very difficult.

When asked about the future, Lapsley is cautious, describing "a very bumpy road." He said that he moves from "the height of hopes to the depths of despair" but argues that the long-term prospects are bright. "There is no guarantee about the future but we are talking about the miracle of South Africa, the miracle that there wasn't a bloodbath. It was not a cheap miracle but one that came out of the sacrifices of millions of people over the decades," he said in an interview.

### **A giant distance**

"In South Africa we have slain one monster--apartheid, but the economic and social challenges are very real," he said. People are demanding real progress in economic transformation. "The distance we still have to travel is a giant distance. And people will not wait forever to see their lives improve."

Lapsley is quick to point out that the South Africans did something very few nations have been willing to attempt. "We put a giant mirror in front of ourselves as a nation--and no one has done that in the same generation." He thinks that the United States might even learn a few things from the struggle in South Africa since it seems to be denying its racial problems.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired





by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, listened to the painful stories of those on both sides of the struggle who admitted their part in atrocities, asking for amnesty. Over 22,000 gave testimony, 18,800 were declared victims and 7,700 asked for amnesty. The commission granted amnesty to 800.

Lapsley said that there is still "unfinished business," however because the commission gave perpetrators amnesty but the victims received nothing, fostering a sense of cynicism. Recently the government has created a fund of 800 million Rand (about \$100 million), a third of what the commission recommended. "It is not sufficient but it is a giant step forward," he said, arguing that there will be no forgiveness until the nation deals more realistically with reparations and restitution. "If the state does not implement reparations effectively people will be very bitter. So the jury is still out on the question."

In the meantime, he points out that political violence may be coming to an end but domestic, family, criminal, sexual violence persists, turning victims into victimizers. "If people's needs are met but they are still filled with hatred, bitterness, self-pity, desire for revenge, we still won't create a very nice society," he warns. "We must proceed on that economic and social and political transformation, but we also must deal at the same time with the psychological, emotional and spiritual effects of the journey that we have traveled. We must find ways to get the poison out--not for the sake of our enemies but for our own sake so that we can be free people on the road to creating a different kind of society."

**--James Solheim is director of the Office of News and Information for the Episcopal Church. This article is based largely on Lapsley's interview with Gil Noble of WABC-TV on his program, "Like It Is."**

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